



Golden Valley High School

Wm. S. Hart Union High School District

"Home of the Grizzlies"



November 12, 2013

Golden Valley High School is pleased to announce that the newly established GV Chapter of *Circle of Friends (CoF)* is alive and well on our campus.

Golden Valley is a relatively new school in the William S. Hart Unified School District, opening our doors in August of 2004. Over time, we've grown to a population of more than 2,200 students. Golden Valley has a diverse student population with the highest percentage of students with disabilities in our district.

While our non-special needs students have always been accepting of our students with special needs, they previously did not possess the skills or training to know how to reach out to and interact with this wonderful, unique group of students on our campus.

Last May, *Circle of Friends* training was offered to our district schools. Seeing this need in our own school, staff at GVHS immediately agreed to establish a *Circle of Friends* program on our campus. Since beginning this two-year training process last May with *Circle of Friends* staff, Barbara Palilis and Ruth Punt, *CoF* GV has been a huge success. So far, **in our first semester**, we have created forty circles. **Forty of our special needs "friends" have been paired and are meeting for lunches with over 85 "peer friends".**

Our *CoF* Faculty Advisor, Marsha Salmon, shares, **"Being part of *Circle of Friends* has been a magical experience for me. It has always been a personal dream of mine to see something like this on campus, where students in special education are made to feel more part of the school community, and *Circle of Friends* has brought this change to Golden Valley High School."**

Paige Escoe, our *CoF* Student President, states, **"I just love *Circle of Friends*. I am so happy to be part of something with this much potential!"**

As mentioned by one excited "friend", Natalie, she loves *Circle of Friends* best, **"Because I like my best friends so much!"**

For years, Kerry Riccio Aguero, our *CoF* General Education Advisor and Choir Director, has seen the difference personal interactions and friendships can create in students' lives. "I am so honored to be part of this organization and show other students and parents the benefits programs like *Circle of Friends* can have to positively impact school and community culture."

Our Speech Language Pathologist, Krystle Sabio, notes, **"I work with many students that are introverted and won't speak unless spoken to. It has been in the *Circle of Friends* setting where they have truly come out of their shell, and it's only been a few months!"**

Two of our *CoF* Staff are special education teachers who work with students with autism. Jaime Foderaro observes, "*Circle of Friends* has been a great addition to Golden Valley. It has taught our general education students acceptance of our students with special needs. For my autistic students, *CoF* has provided a feeling of being included, and has given them the courage to participate in activities they may not have before. Our hope is that our students will be able to maintain long-term, genuine friendships, and be encouraged to continue with the socializing around campus and in the community." Catherine Ridley adds, **"In the short time that *Circle of Friends* has been active at Golden Valley, I've noticed a willingness in my students with autism to integrate and attend campus activities at a level I have not seen in past years. This club is opening doors and giving our students the chance of a typical high school experience.** *CoF* is teaching all students involved a variety of social skills, is broadening their understanding of what makes us a community, and is an amazing vehicle for developing new levels of compassion, tolerance, and acceptance for everyone involved."

Sal Frias, Principal of Golden Valley High School, remarks, "Our *Circle of Friends* is off to a great start. I'm so proud of our staff and students. I'm excited to see what the program will do for GV and our community."

As a staff, we are very excited to see the potential that long term implementation of this program could have on all of our students. This club is changing the lives of both the students in general education and special education, and will leave a lasting impression on their lives.

Sincerely,

The Proud Golden Valley CoF Staff: Marsha Salmon, Kerry Riccio Aguero, Jaime Foderaro, Catherine Ridley, Jennifer McCool, Krystle Sabio and Joel Nelson